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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9268
INFO RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 6343
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 6700
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ NOV LIMA 2861
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA 8490
RUEHQD/AMEMBASSY QUITO 3375
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SUBJECT: CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS JUDGED TO BE IMPROVING

Summary

¶1. (U) Colombian government officials, academics, and international military speakers discussed civil-military interaction at an Embassy co-sponsored seminar on October 26.

Vice Minister of Defense Andres Penate reported that the civilian-military relations were "mature" and improving under the Uribe Administration. Other GOC speakers offered suggestions to improve Colombia's civilian-military understanding, while international speakers offered examples of their respective nation's relationship-building activities.

Civilian-Military Relationship Matures

¶2. (U) "Civilian-military relations are much more mature than the Colombian public perceives," said VM Andres Penate during the first Embassy Bogota co-hosted seminar on civil-military relations. He praised the Colombian military and police for their work on informing civilian leadership decisions in recent years, and stressed the military was not a policy-making entity. Penate also hailed the military's effort to engage with citizens across Colombia through "jornadas" (military-coordinated medical operations) and said such public outreach had helped sustain public support. He asserted that media and Congress portrayed disagreements between civilian and military leadership as an indication that the relationship is strained, but Penate contended that debate kept the relationship healthy. (Note: the most recent Gallup polls indicate that the military has an approval rating of 81% among the general population.)

¶3. (U) Penate, one of two civilian Vice Ministers of Defense, contrasted the U.S. and Colombian experiences with the military and noted that relations had only recently improved.

Unlike the United States, Colombia had considered the military anti-democratic and civilians viewed the military as an entity used only on special occasions despite its 40-year internal conflict, according to Penate. He added that civilians had traditionally ignored the military's insight on security issues, leading to a history of several uninformed decisions by civilian leadership. For example, several years ago the GOC had sent satellite phones into remote corners of Colombia in an attempt to link communities with the government. Civilian officials were taken by surprise when the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas stole those phones and used them for their own ends.

Next Steps to Improve the Relationship

¶15. (U) Other speakers offered suggestions to improve the military's relations with Colombia's public. Vice President Francisco Santos suggested that the military should engage the public by increasing outreach and improving human rights protections. One Peace Commission official read Luis Carlos Restrepo's speech in his absence and underscored his hope that the public would grow to trust the military enough to eliminate private citizens' willingness to use paramilitary or private security measures. Chilean, Brazilian, and U.S. military officials offered presentations outlining the international perspective, and fielded questions about the civilian-military relationship in their respective countries.

¶16. (U) The October 26 conference was the first event of its kind to discuss civilian-military interaction and highlighted the Uribe Administration's interest in improving relations further. Uribe has had three civilian ministers of defense since his 2002 inauguration and his first minister left under heavy criticism that military officials did not approve of her goals or management style.

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